DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 452 556 CS 217 523

AUTHOR Fleming, Michelle M.
TITLE Reconfiguring the Role of the Research Paper: Collaborative Writing To Teach Basic Academic Research and Writing Strategies.
PUB DATE 2001-03-15
NOTE 13p.; Paper presented at the Annual Conference on College Composition and Communication (52nd, Denver, CO, March 14-17, 2001).
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE EDRS Price MF01 Plus Postage. PC Not Available from EDRS.
DESCRIPTORS *Freshman Composition; Higher Education; *Research Papers (Students); *Research Skills; Student Attitudes; Student Research; *Writing Processes; *Writing Strategies
IDENTIFIERS *Collaborative Writing; Student Cooperation

ABSTRACT

Each year that the author of this paper, an English instructor at Moorhead College (Minnesota), teaches the first-year "research paper," one instructor turns more and more to collaborative writing work. And she admits that some of her motives in reshaping the research paper in collaborative ways can seem to be based in assisting herself as a teacher as often as they are based on her desire to help students come into their own. Her first impulse to move toward collaborative research papers came, in fact, out of a great deal of frustration at teaching the kind of "anything goes" research paper course most writing instructors are familiar with--the kind in which students choose their own topics--any topics. This paper takes readers through exactly what the instructor is trying to gain as she makes her research paper courses more collaborative. The paper then moves on to the various types of collaboration her students have used and the reasons that underlie different choices that have been made about different types of collaborative writing. Along the way, it addresses briefly some of the problems that inhere in collaborative work itself, so that these issues can begin to be considered. (NKA)

Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made
from the original document.

ED 452 556

Reconfiguring the Role of the Research Paper: Collaborative Writing to Teach Basic Academic Research and Writing Strategies.

by Michelle Fleming

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
☐ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

M. Fleming

2A

CS 217 523

Michelle M. Fleming

4C's Presentation

15 March 2001

Reconfiguring the Role of the Research Paper:
Using Collaborative Writing to Teach Basic Academic Research and Writing Strategies[1]

I–Introduction

Having taught the "research paper" in various ways, off and on, for the last eight years, I am still never sure about my exact position on this type of college-level writing work. I wonder, much more often than I'd like to, if this project *can be* a writing teacher's (and student's) finest hour, the culmination of a first-year writing course (which is, in fact, what it tends to look like, at least in terms of typical course organization). Sometimes I wonder whether it must always be, to some extent, a compromised and problematic project. While such reflections give me important time to think through what I teach and why I teach it, they inevitably have to bring me back to a place I have so far not been able to escape. It doesn't say, at least not explicitly, in my teaching contract, that the research paper forms part and parcel of my teaching job. But any glance at my schedule of courses brings that message home. Each year within recent memory, I have taught at least four sections of the "research paper course."

I have always felt that there are very substantial and deserving arguments against even the concept of the first-year research paper per se. I agree with Richard Larson, who argues that the

---

[1] *I need to note right from the start that there are a lot of things this paper doesn't do. Because this is a basic pedagogy section, I use my paper to tell the "story" of my classroom or classrooms and I do not go into a lot of the theory that underlies my work. I hope we can do a great deal of this in the question-and-answer session that will follow our papers. I do not talk as much as I'd like -given time constraints- about how collaborative writing enhances the writing process or about how cw looks in the classroom or how it enhances research...or even how it looks in the library or other venues.*

"generic 'research paper'" as a form of writing taught in an department of English is "not defensible"–at least as it is frequently conceived and taught right now. Larson argues that most undergraduate research papers "reflect poor or inadequate research." When we teach the research paper we tend to teach students that research is "a specialized activity that one engages in during a special course, or late in a regular semester or year"; we also tend to teach that this is a task "one does not ordinarily need to be concerned about and can indeed, for the most part, forget about" after the course is over.

If I now tell you that each year I teach the "research paper" I turn more and more to collaborative writing work, I may run the risk of making collaborative writing seem like a sort of escape hatch for me–a way to avoid a project I do not necessarily fully believe in, a way to elude a project I cannot easily or do not want to teach. And I will admit that some of my motives in reshaping the research paper in collaborative ways can seem to be based in assisting myself as a teacher as often as they are based in my desire to help students come into their own. My first impulse to move toward collaborative research papers came, in fact, out of a great deal of frustration at teaching the kind of "anything goes" research paper course most of us are familiar with–the kind in which students choose their own topics, any topics... so that three or four (for some of us, five) classes of twenty-one to twenty-five become filled with all sorts of papers--papers on gun control, euthanasia, gays in the military, school prayer, marijuana legalization, feminism, animal rights, death penalty, and on and on... so that I would begin to feel that as a teacher I could be not much more–or less–than a supervisor for basically 70 different independent studies. But no one will ever be able to convince me that working with 70 or more essentially separate projects a term offers my students the best use of my time and expertise. And–as a

writer myself–I also know that no one can convince me that working and writing with one other person, even if that person is "old and wise" and trained to do this very work, outweigh the advantages that can be gained by writing and working with that one person plus many others, one's peers. Logic would dictate that if collaboration can accomplish these two tasks alone, it accomplishes a great deal. I will argue that it can do a good deal more.

In the time I have I will take you first through exactly what it is I am trying to gain as I make my research paper courses more collaborative. I want to move on, then, to the various types of collaboration my students have used and the reasons that underlie different choices we have made about different types of collaborative writing. Along the way, I will try to address briefly some of the problems that inhere in collaborative work itself, so that we can start to address these issues.

II–"Collaborative Writing, Take Me Away," or What Collaboration Can Take Us from, and Where It Can Take Us To

At its most basic, with collaborative work I try to transcend the research paper I was taught as a student. What I remember of my research papers is that I was more or less assigned my topic–something the teacher wanted to hear about, or something that had worked for her in the past–and then I was given a few suggestions as to books. I went to the library, found the books, "read" them in that skimming fashion, found some excellent quotations, copied them onto note cards, put the note cards in a stack, and shuffled them several times until I found an order that seemed to make sense. I then set the note cards down next to my pen and paper (no computers then), and wrote my paper, paraphrasing one quotation after another until I reached

my "research paper's" page 15. I remember learning two useful things from these experiences. When you go to the library to find books on a particular topic, you will find a whole host of books on the same topic right next to the book you searched for. The other thing I learned is that finding one book and investigating its bibliography can lead you to other great sources. Now these can be useful bits of information; unfortunately, neither of them has directly to do with either thinking hard or writing well. Neither "research paper" experience helped me connect these papers with any other writing, either in my other courses or in the "real world" of work I entered several years later. I argue that we need to focus less on getting to that neat final project and those beautiful sets of note cards–and that we need to focus much more on the strategies and skills we want the process to teach. Collaborative writing can help us do that.

What is it that we want the research paper to teach? Research skills, of course, but it can't mean–as Larson suggests–teaching note taking and data-dumping. Tackling tough issues, no doubt–learning that there aren't many easy questions and learning not to be afraid when research leads not immediately to good answers but rather to more questions. Generally, learning about how to think and write in an extended paper about our ideas and the ideas of those who don't agree with us–and how to be fair to others but persuasive regarding our own (considered, ethical) beliefs.

It's been a troubled and thorny road and I still haven't got everything right. What I have found is that I can use collaborative writing to help me transcend what I don't like about the research papers I've written and far too many of the ones I've taught. It can help me enact what Channell and Crusius in *Aims of Argument* call arguing to inquire, to convince, to persuade, and to negotiate–all the different levels and steps of a good, thoughtful argument. Through

collaborative writing work students are pushed toward greater discussion and testing of ideas and to the realization that there aren't many easy answers and that many, many things need to be interrogated. They learn that a good researched paper doesn't come all tied up in a bow, the product of a good night's work of stringing together note cards that all seem to say the right thing.

As an aside–I will just add a note here and then discuss this further during question and answer, as we wish--Collaboration also enhances the ability of a teacher, a class, and the research projects engendered by that class to speak more to both minority viewpoints and opposing views. If there are not minority views willingly represented within a group, it is the group's responsibility to call on its members to a) research and represent those views and keep the group as a whole mindful of them as they work or b) bring in speakers who can and are willing to address these views.

A lot of this can, of course, be accomplished to some degree in a classroom without collaborative writing. But pulling students into collaborative writing groups where they have ownership, responsibility, culpability, immediacy, and interest seems to make them feel the need to engage more, think more, learn more. There is, after all, something different for all of us when we have to think carefully about our ideas and become responsible for them--their representation and their degree of persuasiveness–when we work side-by-side on a shared project. And as a teacher, I have to say I am much more comfortable in general concluding my classes with collaborative research papers because they, unlike the standard research paper, can more accurately represent where it is we want these students to go–to come to us at the start of a course, to learn from us and each other, but then to move into something a bit closer to the "real world," where they work

not with us (or not so much with us) but with others, negotiating, brainstorming, arguing, defending ideas, gaining ownership... and coming up with a project that is rightfully their own...not ours, and not the library's.

III–Types and techniques of collaboration, or
The Rulebook

That said, I've probably offered you enough conditions and qualifiers to make you wonder what in fact collaborative writing has done for my students and me. I won't say that it has invariably erased the data dump or easy answers or poor research from my classes. I would not argue that I've always been able to work through the very conflicts that collaborative writing offers. My argument in favor of teaching the research paper collaboratively cannot center on an unqualified endorsement of this process or the papers it has produced; what it can center on is a system of "rules" or "guidelines" my students and I have developed for our work–guidelines that help us ensure that we use the researched project to deepen our research skills, interrogate our arguments further, understand and represent alternative and opposing views effectively, and write our positions persuasively.

One of the first books I found on collaborative writing–Andrea Lunsford and Lisa Ede's *Singular Texts, Plural Authors*--offers the definitions of and some of the necessary components to collaborative writing work that continue to provide the groundwork for my classes. I refer you to the handout–this is a handout that is distributed to my students early on in my research courses.

At this point, I should probably take a step back and discuss what changes had to be made in myself as a teacher before I could change my classroom. The first step I had to take seems very basic in retrospect. It wasn't. That first step was allowing or enabling myself to change what my

brain was willing to accept as writing work in theory. In my own writing process I have always been able to recognize that not much of what I do is completely a solo effort; nevertheless, it proved very difficult for me to walk away from what my head had adopted as the definition of a writer–the lone romantic soul locked into a bleak, dim room. When I first tried to think about including collaborative writing in my classroom, I had to spend a good deal of time doing what Alice Walker's Shug, in *The Color Purple*, calls "getting the man off your eyeball." The "man" in this case is not–as it was for Shug and Celie–overarching patriarchal social power or white power. It is "simply" that the very concept of the solo writer in general has some awesome power.

I also find that when I bring collaborative writing into each classroom I have to work against no small amount of suspicion on the part of my students. Chances are they will have done some collaborative writing or at least heard about such projects–and chances are good that what they will "know" is that one person did most of the work while the group took the credit–and, probably, the grade. In order even to start to set up successful collaborative writing work, then, a teacher must first use the course to set up some very basic things about writing in general. It is crucial, in this age of the specter of plagiarism, to tell student writers that when they are working collaboratively it is perfectly okay to use language given to them by others, even if that language seems fairly substantial. I require only that they list their name as chief author and put their peers' names down as collaborators, as we do in some of our scholarly journals, without tagging what was written by whom. It is essential, also, to create a classroom where the comfort level includes a good deal of patience with discomfort, to establish strategies for helping extroverts to bring out introverts (and vice versa, in some ways), to bring about a level of confidence in each student's abilities as writer and thinker, and to teach strategies for dispute and negotiation. Most of us use

these techniques as part of our regular classroom work anyway; my point here is that these types of work are always more, not less, essential in a collaborative writing classroom.

Above and beyond these very basic strategies, teachers must be very clear from the outset what collaborative writing will look like within the confines of our courses. Students must realize–and they will realize this with relief–that they cannot operate entirely on their own in terms of defining what collaborative writing will mean. In the handout I distributed I list several examples of what types of collaborative writing work will be accepted by me–and some examples of types of "collaborative" work that won't. The types I list as acceptable include the following:

- Each group member writes a section of the paper and the group as a whole collaborates on putting the paper together.
- Each group member writes the body of his or her own paper and group members collaborate on the introduction, conclusion, and other sections of the paper that seem to need development.
- The group collaborates on every aspect of writing from topic generation to planning to researching to writing and revising–and this group produces a single paper to be handed in for a grade.

The types that won't work include:

- One person comes up with the topic, one person does the research, and one writes the paper.
- Two people work together to write the paper and the third or fourth persons just kind of hang out.

All group members write sections of the paper and one person rewrites all sections to his or her preferred content and style and hands the paper in as a group project.

We can't, of course, just deliver such a list of suggestions and instructions to our students and expect collaborative writing to proceed smoothly (we can never, in fact, expect collaborative writing to proceed smoothly; it does not do so, any more than writing itself does). If a class is going to encourage successful collaborative writing–of whatever sort–students must be taught what good collaboration can or should look like before they jump into it themselves.

In the past, I've tried to set students up for good collaborative work by distributing detailed handouts with great suggestions, by having discussions in which they ask questions and I provide answers, and even (horrors to me now, in terms of how poorly it worked) even *lecturing* on the effective techniques of collaborative writing work. So far the only teaching "tool" that has worked for me is to model the process, to some extent, in class. I have copied and brought in essays that colleagues of mine have gone over, and upon which they have provided suggestions–sentences, sometimes whole groups of sentences–for me to use. I have also taken the first day of what's listed on our syllabus as "first collaborative writing workshop" and, with the help of a volunteer or two, have tried to model the process I'd like all students to go through. The volunteers and I sit in the middle of the class, "fishbowl" style and, while the class listens, we brainstorm and generate topics and argue about what we'd like to do as if we were a group that was going to write collaboratively.[2] Toward the end of the fishbowl session, we come to some

[2]I should add that as part of this modeling session I take the role of (first) a shy student who needs to be brought out and (then)an aggressive student who tries to take over; the volunteers are asked to cope with both these scenarios. After the modeling session is over, the class discusses how effective the volunteer group members were with both of my "personas" and we talk about what strategies might have worked better.

conclusion about our topic and assign research tasks to each other. Then the class as a whole goes to the library for research instruction. Finally, when we meet again in our classroom, the volunteers and I go into a second fishbowl to talk about the research we've found and where we need to go from this point.

These early "learning" or "modeling" sessions must, of course, be sustained throughout the term, by repeated returns to this level and kind of guidance. Some of your collaborative work, especially at the start, must occur during class, where you can serve as a resource. And some of the collaborative work must be done outside of class, both at sessions where the group meets alone (to foster group responsibility) and during office hour sessions when the group meets with you. The office hour session or sessions provide a time for you to sound out group dynamics. I should note: I am not in favor of having the groups make reports to me about how things are going; this seems to spark a certain sort of tattling that is a growth experience for no one. Instead, I find it most useful to speak of group functions in terms of activities engendered rather than to speak of what particular people do (or don't do).

A penultimate note in terms of both set-up and practice is this. The degree of collaborative writing that occurs must be determined by the students who form the collaborative group, in consultation with you. One of the texts I have used for my collaborative courses, Patricia Bizzell and Bruce Herzberg's *Negotiating Difference*, argues that group work in general should be done by group members who choose each other. In my teaching, I have found that this "choosing" must be extended to include degree and kinds of collaboration. We are trusting our students to take more ownership of their work. Forcing one kind of collaboration over another can only work against us (for it implicitly works against such a statement of trust) and against our

students. The idea is to bring them to understand what needs to be done and the responsibilities they have to themselves and each other. The idea, simply put, is to bring in the *real world* of writing.

One other, crucial rule for me is to assert continually, to both myself and my students, that perhaps *especially* with this type of writing work, process matters as much as result..... If there's time.... (?) I want to say just two more things in terms of developing collaborative writing. Although my classes have moved more toward collaborative writing over the years (in kind of a two steps forward, one step back method), I have to say that projects that start out quite collaborative may well end up being less so. I should add, also, that in the past five years of moving toward what we might call "full" collaborative writing–where groups do, in fact, produce a single text–most of the groups with whom I've worked have decided *not* to attempt a single paper. I've made myself comfortable with this situation and tend to view it as a measure of the group deciding for itself what is best for it. And I think is an indication of a type of "writerly" maturity–a part of what the course must try to cultivate, not work against.

As I said from the start, this is far from a perfect process for me. It's messy, it brings strife, irritation, displeasure, *trouble*–as often as it brings joy, satisfaction, and the successful completion of a final project. The irritation and trouble are a necessary part of the process that leads to that final project. I've learned, also, not to worry overmuch about trouble and strife, and to be satisfied that what is going on works more like the real writing process than what I've seen in most classroom practice.